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ABSTRACT

An educational planning model and instructional approach to prepare school administrators for the role of strategic planners are described. The model, ED QUEST, integrates future research techniques and divergent thinking modes into a participatory group process that provides visions of alternative futures. Primary activities in the process include preparation, development of a notebook of future projects, organizational assessment, analysis of the impact of future trends, development and assessment of scenarios, selection of strategic options, and incorporation of options into a strategic management process. The model is also useful as a teaching-learning vehicle in administrator education programs. One figure is included. (15 references) (LMI)

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Strategic Planning as a Basis for Restructuring Schools

by

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Few people would disagree with the contention that visionary leadership by school administrators is needed if the changes necessary to improve public schooling are to occur. An important theme running through recent calls for restructuring schooling is the need for "... competent, skilled visionary leadership as has never been available before." (UCEA, 1987, p. xvi) To be effective "visionaries" school administrators, like leaders in all sectors of American life, must have foresight into the future (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Foster, 1989). By anticipating the future, administrators can create the vision required for their schools to adapt to the changes in the external environment.

However, the increasing complexity and rapidity of changing environmental forces make it difficult for school administrators to formulate the necessary vision required to adapt. Moreover, conventional practices of long-range or strategic planning do not adequately address the uncertainty created by turbulent change. To effectively deal with an uncertain future, planning approaches must permit school decision-makers to detect and link signals of environmental change with alternative conditions education must confront in the future. From an analysis of possible alternative futures, school administrators can develop long-range goals and strategies for achieving them that will withstand unanticipated environmental developments. This is an approach to envisioning the future that has the potential to assist the school district adapt to anticipated changes.

This paper describes an educational planning model and an instructional approach designed to prepare school administrators as strategic planners. The model, ED QUEST (Mecca & Adams, 1980), integrates futures research techniques and divergent thinking modes into a participatory group process that provides visions of alternative futures. It has been used successfully to teach advanced educational administration students for the past four years and has been used in public school districts and colleges to develop strategic plans. The model depicted in Figure 1 illustrates the component activities and the sequence followed to develop school district strategies.

ED QUEST

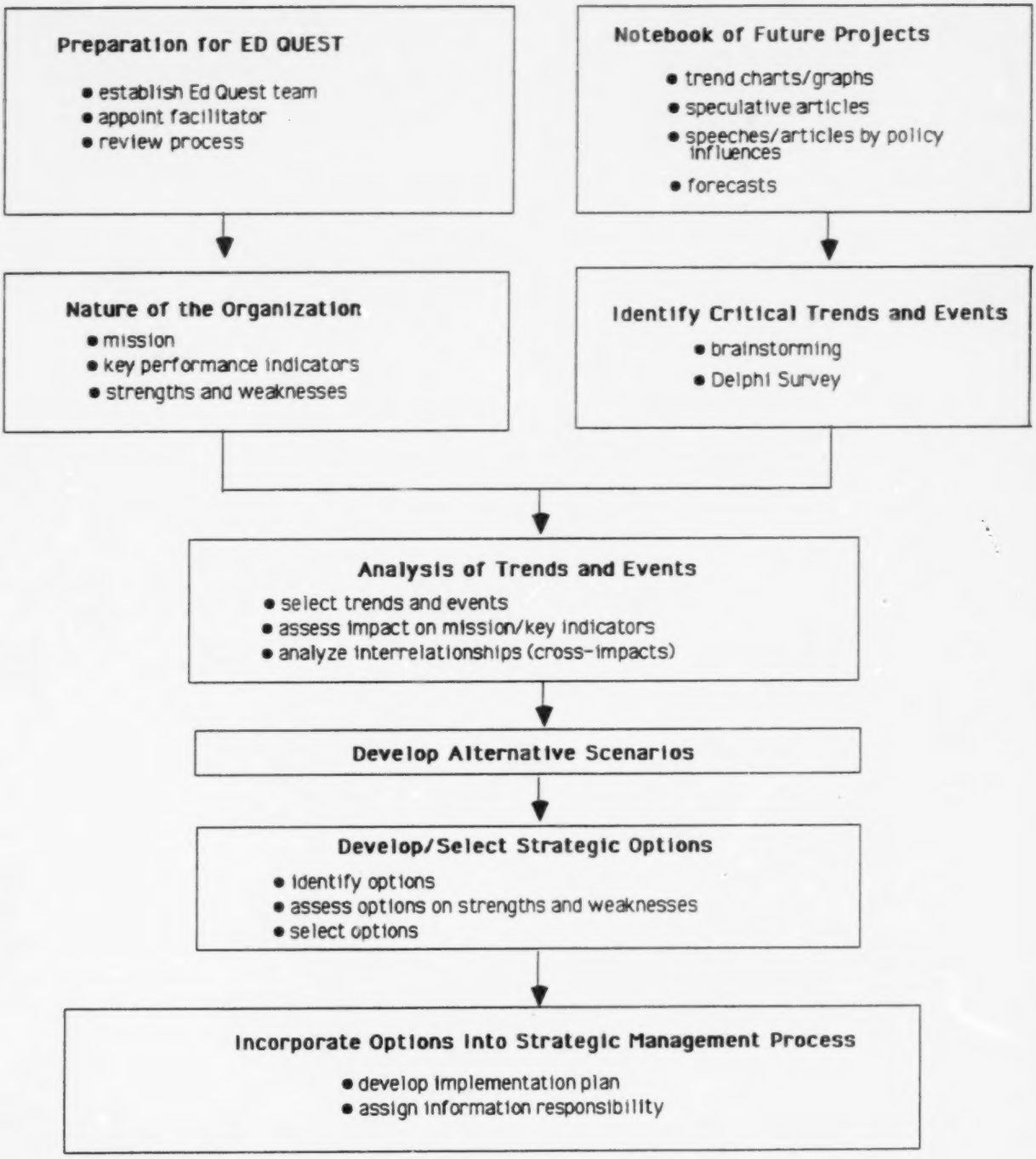

Figure 1

The primary activities in the ED QUEST process are: (a) preparing for the ED QUEST process; (b) developing a notebook of critical trends and events; (c) defining the nature of the organization, including mission components, indicators of its performance and its strengths and weaknesses; (d) identifying and assessing the impact of critical trends and probable future events; (e) developing and assessing scenarios; (f) selecting strategic options; and (g) incorporating those options into the strategic management process.

There are four tasks that need to be completed in preparation for the initial ED QUEST session, including: (a) establishing the ED QUEST team; (b) selecting the team's facilitator; (c) briefing the team on the ED QUEST process; and (d) preparing materials showing past trends and forecasts of events that could affect the organization.

Before initiating the activities of the ED QUEST process, the facilitator should orient the team to the basic ED QUEST principles. At this orientation meeting, the facilitator should emphasize the importance of involving the organization's top decision-makers in the ED QUEST process (if its results are to be accepted by the organization's staff) and should explain the benefit of the ED QUEST process in clarifying the collective view of the environment and the school district's mission. The facilitator should also stress that the objective of ED QUEST is to provide an understanding of alternative future developments that might affect the organization; it is not an exercise in prophecy. Indeed, the process is only the first step to an understanding of the environmental factors to consider in the organization's strategic management process. Using the results of the ED QUEST procedure as a starting point, later analysis will probe more deeply into specific trends and events relevant to the organization's future.

An important task of the facilitator that must be completed prior to the commencement of the ED QUEST process is to develop a notebook of emerging issues, potential events and critical trends that could affect the organization during the planning time frame, five to ten years. The facilitator can use a variety of services

to assist in scanning the pertinent literature for articles for inclusion in the notebook. Some examples are, the Girl Scouts of America, SEDL-SCAN at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, and the United Way of America.

In addition to providing background information for the ED QUEST team, the notebook should be used as background material to construct a Delphi questionnaire (Campbell, 1971). The notebook should include the following:

1. trend extrapolations of key educational statistics (e.g., the number of high school graduates). Trend data about the district as well as the state and nation should be included.
2. recent articles about the future of education.
3. speeches and comments by influential individuals (e.g., legislatures, policy makers, researchers, futurists, etc.).
4. information on technological, economic, social and political developments having possible future significance for education.
5. data suggesting changes in American values and attitudes that affect education.

Each team member must read the notebook prior to the first ED QUEST session; therefore, notebooks should be distributed at least two weeks in advance of that session.

The focus of the first session is (a) to define the organization in terms of its mission, key performance indicators, and internal strengths and weaknesses; and (b) to assess and verify trends and events that may affect the future of the organization. In the interval between the first and second team sessions, a series of scenarios is developed and a session summary is written. Both are circulated to all team members.

In the second ED QUEST session, the team (a) assesses the scenarios for their organizational implications; (b) develops strategic options in response to the implications of each scenario; (c) assesses these options in terms of the school district's strengths and weaknesses; (d) selects those options that are robust across scenarios and/or appears to enhance the

position of the school district regardless of future conditions; and (e) assigns responsibility for developing and implementing an action plan to accomplish the most appropriate strategic options.

The first component of the ED QUEST model produces a description of the current nature of the school district. Key decision-makers should formulate organizational strategy based upon a realistic appraisal of the current nature of the organization, rather than one " ... coloured excessively by ...past experiences" (Taylor, 1979, p.47). In this model, the organizational nature of the school district is described in terms of its current mission, key performance indicators, and district organizational strengths and weaknesses. The descriptions developed for these district variables are later used to assess the organizational consequences and impacts of future environmental changes and to evaluate the effectiveness of proposed strategies.

To define the nature of the organization, the ED QUEST team should first describe the specific elements of the school district's mission. Specifically, answers to the following three questions can be invaluable to an ED QUEST team in defining the mission of the school district:

"What needs does the school district fulfill?"
"What groups of students and/or clients does the school district serve ?"
"What programs and/or services does the school district provide?"

Once the school district's mission has been defined, the ED QUEST team should develop a list of key indicators of organizational performance. Key indicators are organizational factors that make the difference between organizational success or failure (Rockart, 1979) and typically include the factors that most people would agree are significant to the organization's well-being. Generally, the indicators are those that educators and the public patrons use to determine the "quality" of the school district.

Indicators generally include measures of effectiveness,

efficiency, cost, and competitive advantage. Some generally accepted measures of these indicators include the following:

- student academic achievement (test scores)
- employment rate of graduates
- student and faculty retention rate
- student higher education enrollment rates
- awards received by students and faculty members
- program cost per student

Next, planning team members develop a comprehensive picture of the school district's current competencies by identifying a list of school district strengths and weaknesses. The list of strengths and weaknesses could be developed using brainstorming or the nominal group technique. Irrespective of the procedure used, the team should select the 10-12 most significant strengths and 10-12 most significant weaknesses.

The essence of the ED QUEST process is the development of strategic plans that take into account the future state of the environment in which the district will operate. Thus, identifying the important environmental elements, trends and events, is essential. A completed Futures Prospect Notebook is the environmental information base from which many of the trends and future events will be identified by planning team members.

The trends and events are generally identified using one of two Delphi procedures. Although they vary in complexity, either procedure will produce a data base of trends and probable events perceived as important by team members. With the first procedure, a group process such as brainstorming or the nominal group technique is used to produce the list of trends and events. From the list those considered most crucial to the future of the district are selected. Although the simpler of the two, this procedure requires more time during the session and may produce a less comprehensive list.

With the second procedure, two rounds of a formal Delphi survey are conducted prior to the ED QUEST sessions. All team members are surveyed as well as other members of the district staff and/ or community whose input is desired. A third round is

then conducted during the session itself to select the critical trends and events. Although this procedure takes substantial time and expertise, it allows more staff participation. It also generally results in a more inclusive trend and event set.

Once the events and trends have been selected, a cross-impact matrix is developed to assess the interrelationships among them. The events-on-trends matrix requires team members to assess the impact each event, if it were to occur, will have on the level of each trend. A similar assessment is made to determine whether the occurrence of an event will affect the likelyhood of the other events occurring.

The final activity of the first ED QUEST session is an assessment of the selected trends and events on the key performance indicators. This assessment process is similar to the cross-impact analysis and serves to identify specific changes to the district that may result should these critical trends and events occur.

During the interim between the first and second ED QUEST sessions, the facilitator develops a set of scenarios showing a range of possible futures confronting the school district. The first scenario developed is generally a depiction of the "most likely" future. It describes the "expected future" as defined by the trends and events identified as most critical to the district. In this sense, the "most likely" future represents the planning assumptions used in most planning models, written in the form of a scenario.

Up to three other scenarios can be created describing other futures that could occur. Each of these scenarios describes the changes in the trend levels resulting from the occurrence of events over the chosen time frame. In essence, the alternative futures depicted in these scenarios represents variations from the "most likely" scenario in the future of the school district's environment. Other approaches to developing scenarios can be used if time and expertise permit.

At the beginning of the second session, the facilitator

should explain the scenario analysis process. Analyzing these scenarios is a critical step in the ED QUEST process for it serves as the basis for developing organizational strategies. Like plans, forecasts within scenarios are transitory things that need constant adjustment if they are to guide thought and action. Therefore, if something important is missing from the scenario, add it. If the forecast seems trivially obvious or highly counterintuitive probe the underlying logic. If the results survive, use them. If not, fix them.

After the group has rigorously examined the scenarios, they should ask themselves, "How would the organization be affected if this particular future materialized?" This step is a critical part of strategic planning because environmental forecasts are of little or no value unless decision-makers estimate the degree and nature of their impact on the organization (Halal, 1984). Team members should begin the identification of implications by assessing the consequences of the scenario to the current and future mission elements of the school district. This is a collective approach to developing a vision for the future of the school district.

After all lists of implications have been modified/approved by the ED QUEST team, a preliminary list of strategic options is developed. It is essential that the team develop a list of strategies that are feasible and are appropriately focused (i.e., strategies not operational objectives). To ensure this, the facilitator should briefly review for the planning team the characteristics of an organizational strategy and the decision areas to which organizational strategy applies.

The concept of strategy is deceptively simple and, therefore, difficult to define (Cope, 1981). In ED QUEST, strategy is defined as a set of consistent behaviors that the organization undertakes for a period of time to maintain its internal stability while simultaneously adapting to change in its external environment (Mintzberg, 1978). Thus, the essential functions of an organizational strategy are to (a) define the relationship of the total organization to its external environment and (b) give guidance to the school district's staff in carrying out their

administrative and operational activities (Shirley, 1982). A strategy that places the district in an advantageous position in relationship to the future external changes described in the scenarios is a good candidate for further evaluation by the team.

Once the preliminary list of strategic options has been agreed upon, the team measures the potential of each strategic option to enhance or inhibit each organizational strength and weakness identified in the first session. The team should select strategic options with large positive impact on organizational strengths and large negative impact on organizational weaknesses. The strategies that the team decides meet the criteria of addressing the implications of more than one scenario become important to the future of the school district. Other criteria may be used to select the final list of strategies, including political feasibility.

The results of the ED QUEST process can be incorporated into the school district's strategic management in several ways. Specific plans may be developed for implementing each strategic option selected by the planning team. In this approach, personnel would be assigned responsibility for developing detailed action plans and recommendations for implementation. Typically these staff members would have knowledge, expertise, and functional responsibilities in the area related to and/or affected by the implementation of the strategic option. The action team, composed of the staff who were assigned planning tasks, might periodically provide a progress report to the school district's administration and the organizational planning team and make recommendations for changes in school district policy.

Another approach is to incorporate the strategic options into the school district's annual operational plan. Each option identified through the ED QUEST process would be reformulated as a specific organizational objective. Specific sub-objectives and activities with projected completion dates are derived and the appropriate functional units are assigned responsibilities for their accomplishment.

The implementation of school district strategy is also

dependent upon several key factors. Administrative leadership is required to inspire the commitment of the district's staff to the strategy (Rock & Eisthen, 1983; Bennis & Nanus, 1985). A prevailing organizational culture, conducive to supporting the changes represented by the strategy, is also necessary (Schein, 1984). Finally, the current work assignments of staff have to be "uncoupled" from strategies previously followed in the district (Hobbs& Heany, 1977). This approach to strategic leadership will position the school district to restructure or adapt to future conditions in a pro-active way.

Regardless of the option the district's administration decides to use, it is imperative that the results of the ED QUEST process form the basis for setting the strategic direction of the school district. By anticipating what is likely to happen in the external environment and assessing how it will affect the nature and quality of its programs, the central administration and the board of education will be in a better position to deal with uncertainties inherent in the future and improve the district's capacity to accomplish its mission, including any necessary structural changes.

Although initially designed as a strategic planning model, ED QUEST can be used as a teaching-learning vehicle for preparing future school district leaders. The instructional approach is a simulation. Students assume roles as school district decision -makers formed into a strategic planning team. The professor assumes the role of facilitator. Using the ED QUEST model as a guide, they proceed through a series of futures research procedures to develop strategic educational plans. The simulation begins with an environmental scanning activity where the class assembles signals of changes and emerging discontinuities in a all sectors of the environment. Each student must write an abstract of a scanned document for inclusion in the class' Future Prospect Notebook. The changes identified in the scanning exercise are next structured into their component elements, trends and events. The trends and events are recast into a Delphi format in order to subjectively forecast the likely level of the trends and the likelyhood of event occurrence over the chosen planning time frame. The potential impact of the events and trends on the

simulated school district is also assessed.

The results of the Delphi assessments are used to narrow the focus of the strategic planning to the important trends and events. These selected events and trends are subject to further scrutiny through the cross-impact assessment process. The data set of potential events and trends that will impact the school district serves as a basis for describing alternative futures written as scenarios. Students, organized into three or four small teams, create scenarios of alternative futures that may confront the simulated school district. Each scenario defines a unique configuration of future external conditions. Together, the set of scenarios present the range of uncertainty the students perceive as inherent in the future.

The students, as strategists, develop strategic goals broad enough to address organizational implications arising from the alternative conditions described in the scenarios. Students also develop a revised mission statement for the district. The initial set of identified strategies are then analyzed in light of the current strengths and weaknesses of the school district. Those strategies estimated to enhance strengths and reduce weaknesses of the district are selected for implementation.

This instructional approach not only teaches the skills of various futures research techniques and strategic planning, but the teaching-learning setting of this simulation also allows the professor and students together to consider possibilities of what could be rather than what has been (Achilles, 1988). Future possibilities and visions for schooling are created and examined in a mutually supportive and non-threatening way.

Simply exhorting administrators and administrators-in-training to become visionary leaders is insufficient to have them perform as such. Readings and discussions are desirable but less than adequate to insure that administrators have the ability to develop strategic plans for a desirable future for their school district. Training that provides the opportunity to forecast alternative futures, develop the analytic techniques and work creatively in groups give students the competencies and confidence

to actually serve as visionary leaders who will be able to restructure schools to meet future conditions.

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